

President during Cold war

Kennedy, John F.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States (1961-63), was, at the age of 43, the youngest man and the first Roman Catholic ever elected to the presidency. Rich, handsome, elegant, and articulate, he aroused great admiration at home and abroad. His assassination in Dallas, Tex., in November 1963 provoked outrage and widespread mourning. His term of office as president was too short, however, to permit safe judgments about his place in history.

Early Life

Kennedy was born in Brookline, Mass., on May 29, 1917, a descendant of Irish Catholics who had immigrated to America in the 19th century. His father, Joseph P. Kennedy, was a combative businessman who became a multimillionaire, head of the Securities and Exchange Commission, and ambassador to Great Britain. He and his wife, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, had the highest ambitions for their nine children, of whom John was the second son (see KENNEDY family).

Kennedy graduated from Choate School in Wallingford, Conn., briefly attended Princeton University, and then entered Harvard University in 1936. At Harvard he wrote an honors thesis on British foreign policies in the 1930s; it was published in 1940, the year he graduated, under the title *Why England Slept*. In 1941, shortly before the United States entered World War II, Kennedy joined the U.S. Navy. While on active duty in the Pacific in 1943, the boat he commanded—PT 109—was sunk by the Japanese. Kennedy performed heroically in rescuing his crew, but he aggravated an old back injury and contracted malaria. He was discharged in early 1945.

Congressman and Senator

In 1946, Kennedy ran successfully for a Boston-based seat in the U.S. House of Representatives; he was reelected in 1948 and 1950. As a congressman he backed social legislation that benefited his working-class constituents. Although generally supporting the foreign policies of President Harry S. TRUMAN, he criticized what he considered the administration's weak stand against the Communist Chinese. Kennedy continued to advocate a strong, anti-Communist foreign policy throughout his career. Restless in the House, Kennedy challenged incumbent Republican senator Henry Cabot LODGE, Jr., in 1952. Although the Republican presidential candidate, Dwight D. EISENHOWER, won in Massachusetts as well as the country as a whole, Kennedy showed his remarkable vote-getting appeal by defeating Lodge.

A year later, on Sept. 12, 1953, Kennedy married Jacqueline Bouvier (see ONASSIS, JACQUELINE BOUVIER KENNEDY). The couple had three children: Caroline Bouvier (b. Nov. 27, 1957), John Fitzgerald, Jr. (b. Nov. 25, 1960), and a second son who died in infancy in August 1963.

Kennedy was a relatively ineffectual senator. During parts of 1954 and 1955 he was seriously ill with back ailments and was therefore unable to play an important role in government. Critics observed that he made no effort to oppose the anti-civil libertarian excesses of Sen. Joseph R. MCCARTHY of Wisconsin. His friends later argued, not entirely persuasively, that he would have voted to censure McCarthy if he had not been hospitalized at the time. During his illness Kennedy worked on a book of biographical studies of American political heroes. Published in 1956 under the title *Profiles in Courage*, it won a Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1957. Like his earlier book on British foreign policy, it revealed his admiration for forceful political figures. This faith in activism was to become a hallmark of his presidency.

In 1956, Kennedy bid unsuccessfully for the Democratic vice-presidential nomination. Thereafter, he set his sights on the presidency, especially after his reelection to the Senate in 1958. He continued during these years to support a firmly anti-Communist foreign policy. A cautious liberal on domestic issues, he backed a compromise civil rights bill in 1957 and devoted special efforts to labor legislation.

By 1960, Kennedy was but one of many Democratic aspirants for the party's presidential nomination. He put together, however, a well-financed, highly organized campaign and won on the first ballot. As a northerner and a Roman Catholic, he recognized his lack of strength in the South and shrewdly chose Sen. Lyndon Baines JOHNSON of Texas as his running mate. Kennedy also performed well in a series of unprecedented television debates with his Republican opponent, Vice-President Richard M. NIXON. Kennedy promised tougher defense policies and progressive health, housing, and civil rights programs. His New Frontier, he pledged, would bring the nation out of its economic slump.

Presidency

Kennedy won the election, but by a narrow margin. He lacked reliable majorities in Congress. Primarily for these reasons, most of his domestic policies stalled on Capitol Hill. When advocates of racial justice picked up strength in 1962-63, he moved belatedly to promote civil rights legislation (see CIVIL RIGHTS ACTS). He also sought a tax cut to stimulate the economy. At the time of his assassination, however, these and other programs such as federal aid to education and MEDICARE remained tied up in Congress. It was left to his successor, President Johnson, to push this legislation through the more compliant congresses of 1964 and 1965.

Kennedy's eloquent inaugural address--in which he exhorted the nation: "Ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country"--sounded cold war themes. Soon thereafter, the president acted on his anti-Communism by lending American military assistance to the BAY OF PIGS INVASION of Cuba in April 1961. The amphibious assault had been planned by the Central Intelligence Agency under the Eisenhower administration. The actual invasion was Kennedy's decision, however, and he properly took the blame for its total failure. Later in his administration he tried to diminish anti-Americanism in the Western Hemisphere by backing development projects under the ALLIANCE FOR PROGRESS, but the small sums involved had little impact. The Peace Corps program was developed with similar goals in mind (see ACTION).

Kennedy's chief adversary abroad was the Soviet leader Nikita KHRUSHCHEV. As early as June 1961 the two men talked in Vienna, but the meeting served only to harden Soviet-American hostility. Khrushchev then threatened to sign a treaty with East Germany that would have given the East Germans control over western access routes to Berlin. Kennedy held firm, and no such treaty was signed. The Soviets responded, however, by erecting a wall between East and West Berlin. Kennedy used the crisis to request from Congress, and to receive, greatly increased appropriations for defense.

Berlin
wall
crisis

By far the tensest overseas confrontation of the Kennedy years occurred with the CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS. In October 1962, U.S. intelligence discovered that the Russians were constructing offensive missile sites in Cuba. Kennedy recognized that such missiles would add little to Russian military potential, but he regarded the Soviet move as deliberately provocative. Resolving to show his mettle, he ordered a naval and air quarantine on shipments of offensive weapons to Cuba. At first armed conflict seemed likely. But the Soviets pulled back and promised not to set up the missiles; the United States then said it would not attack Cuba.

As if chastened by this crisis, the most frightening of the cold war, the Soviets and Americans in 1963 signed a treaty barring atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. Kennedy nevertheless remained as ready as before to stop Communist advances. He continued to bolster American defenses and stepped up military aid to South Vietnam, where revolutionary forces were increasingly active. By November 1963, the United States had sent some 16,000 military personnel to Vietnam. His administration also intervened in South Vietnamese politics by at least conniving at the overthrow of NGO DINH DIEM in November 1963.

Assassination

By this time Kennedy was thinking ahead to the presidential campaign of 1964. In order to promote harmony between warring factions of the Democratic party in Texas, he traveled there in November 1963. While driving in a motorcade through Dallas on November 22, he was shot in the head and died within an hour.

President Johnson appointed the WARREN COMMISSION to investigate the assassination. It concluded that the killer, acting alone, was 24-year-old Lee Harvey OSWALD. No motive was established. Speculation persisted over the years, however, that Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy.

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